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COVID-19 INFORMATION FOR THE OPHTHALMOLOGY PATIENT

The novel coronavirus also referred to as the acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or 2019-nCoV is a highly contagious virus that can cause a severe respiratory disease known as COVID-19. It first broke out in Wuhan Province in China in November 2019 but from 11 March 2020 it was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The hardest hit countries have been China, Iran, South Korea, Italy, Switzerland and Germany. The number of cases globally stands at 339 259 with 14 706 reported deaths. In South Africa there are 274 reported cases and currently no deaths have been documented.

The virus can present with mild flu-like symptoms from fever, a dry cough, sore throat and difficulty breathing to severe symptoms of pneumonia, which can cause death. There have been reports of the virus presenting as a conjunctivitis. It is typically the elderly or those with chronic illnesses who present with severe symptoms that may cause death. There is currently no known vaccine.

Ophthalmologists and their patients are particularly vulnerable to contracting and spreading the virus because of the close contact required for an ophthalmological examination i.e. slit-lamp. It is therefore incumbent upon all of us to stop the spread and save the lives of those that are most vulnerable. We all need to act now.

As a health care provider, your ophthalmologist would have already started to implement protocols to help limit the spread of the virus in their practice or clinic. Examples of this are:

- a. Cancelling or rescheduling all non-essential surgeries, procedures or appointments.
- b. Applying universal protective and hygiene measure when engaging with patients - hand washing, spraying surfaces and equipment with antiseptic liquids and/or alcohol. Wearing of face masks, aprons, disposable gloves and gowns.
- c. Screening patients for symptoms i.e.- checking of temperature with a non-contact thermometer.
- d. Attaching barrier devices to their examination equipment, and.
- e. Limiting the number of patients in waiting rooms to a bare minimum.

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Here are a few things you can do to help in the fight against the spread of this disease.

1. Protect yourself and others:
 - a. Wash your hands regularly.
 - b. Cover your mouth when you cough.
 - c. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth unnecessarily.
 - d. Wear a mask if you are infected or have come into contact with someone who is infected.
 - e. Wipe down and clean surfaces before and after touching them.
 - f. Stay fit, healthy and well hydrated.
 - g. Do not panic, spread false news or mis-information.
2. Avoid unnecessary contact with people:
 - a. Stay at home.
 - b. Avoid touching other people and objects.
 - c. Limit social involvement, especially where large groups are involved.
 - d. Postpone or cancel all non-urgent appointments including doctor's appointments. Call your doctor regarding this.

If you have had recent international travel and especially to high risk countries (China, France, Germany, Italy, Iran, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Hong Kong, Portugal or Singapore) or have come into contact with such a person, you need to self-quarantine by staying indoors, away from people and applying the general hygiene procedures mentioned above for a minimum of 14 days. Should you develop any symptoms you should NOT present to your GP, hospital or clinic. You will need to contact the government 24 hour Hotline number on 0800 029999 or the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD). They will advise you on the steps you need to take further to get tested and where to go to receive treatment.

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